

INNOVATIONS

A study on the Ras tradition of Manipur

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Abstract:

The history of the performing arts is quite interesting area of study, from the historical purpose to know the culture of a particular society. It bears so many historical aspects that could fill the empty accounts of different aspects of humankind of different regions of India. It has its own uniqueness with formative data regarding one particular society. These arts carried the cultural as well as socio- religious information, detailed of the people that belonged to a specific area. One of the famous performing arts from the North- East Indian is the Ras performance and this tradition of ras is so popular among the North-Eastern people, with its different features that followed in different regions. This article is about the Ras tradition of Manipur and it will discuss on the origin, growth and present scenario of the Ras tradition in that land. The religious, cultural and the social impacts on the performing art of Ras in Manipur will discuss in this article as well.

Key words: 1.Ras 2.performing art 3. Manipur

1.1 Introduction:

The tradition of Krishna Lila performed as *Ras* is one of the most important performing arts of the North- East India. In every state from the North- East India, the features of the performances of *Ras* are different from each other.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had described Manipur as the “Jewel of India”. It is a small North Eastern state of India, flanked in the North by Nagaland, in the South by Mizoram, in the East by Myanmar and in the West by Cachar district of Assam.

Manipur is renowned for its famous dances, polo game, handlooms, siroy lily, Manipuri dolls etc. From the cultural point of view, Manipur is rich in many forms. Manipur is known to the world through its dance. The most important feature of Manipur is remains in the close association of religion with music and dance. The interesting fact is that their dance is religious and its aim is spiritual experience. Its development has been through religious festivals and daily activities of lives. The Manipuri dances may be classified into two categories- (i) Pre -Vaishnavite forms, and (ii) those connected with the Hindu cult in the 18th century.

When the entire state adopted Gaudiya Vishnavism as the official religion, the Manipuris produced the beautiful *Rashleela* under the patronage of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1768- 1798). The first *Ras* strictly after the classical tradition was dedicated to Sri Govindaji at the *Ras Mandal* at Langthabal (new Kanchipur) on *Mera Purnima* (full- moon day of September- October). The *Ras* tradition grew from strength to strength in the hands of succeeding kings. They believe that *Ras* is not for showing to the onlookers but it is a meditation on God who plays in *Vrindavana* in human form. In fact, people there in Manipur never used to say like he is going to witness the *Ras*, but he says that he is bowing down before the *Ras*.

1.2 Objectives:

The main objectives of this article are,

1. To study the history of the *Ras* in Manipur,
2. To discuss the form of art of *Ras* in Manipur,
3. To trace the features of the *Rasleela* of Manipur.

1.3 Methodology:

The methodology that had followed to present this article is totally library based exploratory research. So, the research methodology primarily involves critical analysis of existing secondary literature resources.

1.4 Disussion :

The origins of the *Rasleela* in Manipur:

The *Rasleela* depicts the story of Sri Krishna's divine love sports with the *Gopis* of *Brindaban*, as explained in the 10th chapter of *Srimad Bhagavat*. This contains the highest of divine *Roses*. Seeing, hearing, performing and even a remote attention to *Rasleela* are considered by the followers of the *Bhagavat* cult as acts of supreme virtue. Manipuri Hindus are worshippers of *Radha- Krishna*, the divine communion. From the introduction of the tradition of *Rasleela* performances according to the strict tenets embodied in the *Srimad Bhagavat* the dance talent of the Manipuris found fresh avenue for wider and deeper exercises. The developments of this tradition were on the following foundations:

1. In the matter of the dance techniques, the *Lai Haraoba* and the resources like sword and spear fighting provided ready materials for the master composers.
2. The basic concept of Manipuri folk dances was immaculately preserved to such extent that in none of the *Ras* Dances even the most critical observer can trace any mixture of the local tradition with outside influence, however, strong it might be.
3. The aspect of costumes is a total departure either from life or from existing Indian tradition.
4. Although the bodily movements and the customary aspect remain deep-rooted in Manipuri tradition the theme is total adaptation of the *Ras* episode. Described in the *Srimad Bhagavat Mahapurana*. In the process of this adoption the scientific sources of Indian dances were thoroughly mastered by the composers of the Manipuri *Ras* Dances. The rich varieties of *mudras*, intricate *talas*, subtle movements of the limbs to suit the requirements of the expressions made by the different characters.

This dance was promoted by the kings through patronage, contributions of the general population also worth mentioning.

The description of the Ras Nartan:

An ardent devotee should possess necessary stamina to observe vows, penance and perform the necessary rituals such as worship of Sri Govindaji, Tulsi plant, abstaining from fish and worship of earthen pot and sanctification of the dance arena. The male *Nata Pala Kirtan* which begins in the night must serve as a sort of prologue to *Ras* in which they sing songs of *Chaitanya*, king Bhagyachandra and personages for the proposed dance.

After this, the *Sutradharas* (mostly females) in the north-west corner of the hall sing the songs of Krishna's divine love play as described in the *Bhagvat*. According to the song, the *Gopis* along with Krishna performed the dance on the bank of the Yamuna.

The plays such as the arrival of *Krishna*, *Radha* and the *Gopis* at the appointed place, Krishna's disappearance from the company of the *Gopis* and *Radha* searching for the Lord through song on the bank of *Prema Seva* of the *Gopis* towards him, questioning him by the *Gopis*, his answers to the questions, his *rasleela* with the *Gopis*, *Jalakeli* wandering in the forest and *Gopis* return to their homes at the end of the night are performed in due order. It ends with the *Arati Nritya* in which the whole audience stands up and takes part.

It was the policy of the *Vaishnava* kings to allow the people in using a foreign language in their vehicle of expression. By doing so the audience is induced to believe that the dialogues and songs which were of the deities were really the words of the deities and not of the ordinary people. It is important to note that the *Vaishnava* kings of Manipur composed devotional songs in *Brajavali* which is an artificial language containing Maithili, Bengali and Sanskrit words.

Costumes and Ornaments:

So far as the costumes and ornaments are concerned, there are many *Potloi Set pas* (those who keep these costumes and ornaments) who rent them for the performance at same rates. It is a cherished ambition of every Manipuri girl and the aged women to participate in the *Ras* by putting on costumes and ornaments. The costume for Krishna consists of a bulk silk Dhoti, crown of flowers topped with fan like piece embossed with silver Jan and peacock feather, a silver flute with flowers, rings, bangles, bracelets, armbands for the hand and silver Jan beads and ornaments for the foot.

The costume and ornaments of *Radha* and other *Gopis* consist of an embroidered brightly coloured silk skirt called *Rasham Phurit* (green colour for *Radha* and red colour for all *gopis*), a short flair of silver gauze over the silk skirt a girdle round the waist, and a veil thrown over the head with various ornaments on different parts of the body. They do their hair high up with flowers round the coiffure (Buddha Jata style). Mask is generally put on in connection with *Gostha Lila* and *Kaliya Daman*.

Music aspects of Ras Leela:

The music aspect occupies an important place in the total structure of a *Ras*. A team of *Sutradharis* led by the Guru of the performance includes at least two lady singers, a flute player, conch blower and other instrumental musicians whose strength and variety may differ from performance to performance according to the taste and capacity of the organizers, sit usually in the

north-western corner of the *Ras-Mandal* to provide musical commentary and background to the performance.

Types of Ras:

Rasleela with its various types dictated by thematic variations deserves a special treatment (in a sense this also represents the continuation and enrichment of the *yatra* tradition of Bengal). The entire presentation with sell the classical features of Raga music, *Padavali* songs, the role of the *Sutradhari*, the stylized dance- composition called *Bhangi Parengs* (5 in numbers for all the *Tandava* and *Lasya Rasleela*) and intensely religious atmosphere prevailing in the *natamandapas* is a unique gift of *Rajarshi Bhagyhandra*.

The Manipuris have *Maharas* (on the full- moon night of *Kartik*), *Vasanta Ras* (on the full- moon of *Chaitra*), and *Kunja Ras* (on the full- moon of *Ashvin*), still at the royal *natamandap*, with Krishna and *Radha* appearing with images in the *Govindaji's* temple. *Gosthaleela*, also called as *Gopa Ras*, is played at the royal palace on the *Gostha- Ashthami* day of the month of *Kartik*. These four types of *Rasleela* are still a must at the place *mandap* and are still watched by thousands with deep religious fervour. *Nitya Ras* can be played outside the royal court on any day in any *mandap*.

The story of *Maha Ras* is based on *Rasapanchadhyaya* of *Bhagavat Purana*. Lord Krishna on the full moon night of *Kartika* to fulfill his promise of performing the *Rasleela* with the *Gopis*, reaches the appointed place (*kunja*). How Krishna dances with each of *gopis* at a same time all the stories are linked by the *Sutradhari* (generally two) and giving commentaries in *slokas* and songs, there are *Krishna Amhisar*, followed by *Radha Abhisar*, *Bhangi Pareng* (*Nritya Prabandha*) concluding with home coming (*Griha Gaman*).

The *Vasanta Ras* is all about the introduction of the *holi khel* in the context of spring (*vasanta*) season and thematic variation is provided by Krishna's play reconciliation between the Lord and his Sakti, *Radha*.

The stories of *Kunja Ras* are about *Rasleela* of Krishna and *Gopis* in a grove (*kunja*).

Nitya Ras or *Nartana Ras* is based on the theme that followed the old pattern and provides nothing new in the thematic content and it may be played any day in the *mandapas* throughout the year.

Gostha Leela (*Gopa Ras*) is also based on the *Bhagavata* theme. Sage *Narad* teaches Krishna and *Balaram* to perform the task of the *Gopalakas*. At the request of the cowherd boys, both Krishna and *Balaram* are sent to the forest to tend the cows. They play and shake the palm trees to satisfy their hunger. King *Kamsa*, the sworn enemy of Krishna sends demon *Dhenukasur* to disturb them and another demon in the form of a crane- *Vakasur* for the same purpose, who are killed by *Balaram* and Krishna respectively.

It is generally believed on the basis of records that, *Maha Ras*, *Kunja Ras* and *Vasanta Ras* are the earliest creations whereas *Nitya Ras* and *Diba Ras* (done during the day time) are later additions of subsequent kinds of Manipur. *Gostha Leela* is an earlier composition whereas *Udukhol Leela* is an arrival in the later part of the 19th century A. D. It is also possible that on a close examination of the *Rasleelas* and *Sattriya* dance of Assam (composed in 16th century by *Sankara Deva*), at least some thing inspiration for *Rasleela* might have come from Assam, thereby revealing a source going

beyond the *Vaishnavite Yatra* tradition from Bengal. The *Rasleela* is a unique choreographic expression, born out of great scholarship and commendable inspiration from various sources.

These *Rasleelas* are performed in *Nata Mandaps* (dancing hall), built in front of temple in the same premises. The space for holding the performance is provided in the centre (*Ranga Sthala*). The centre is decorated with flowers, creepers and paper cut designs. There is also a traditional code specifying definite rules and regulations with regard to the dimension of the stage auditorium, décor and arrangement of seats. Every *Rasleela* is to be proceed by *Nata Sankirtana* performance, when the artistes sing about *Gourachandra* and end with *Nityai pada*, following the strict sequence of *Nata Sankirtana* and in consonance with the tradition of Bengal *Vaishnavism*. To the Manipuri *Vaishnavas*, *Nata Sankirtana* is *maha yajna*- the Great Sacrifice.

1.5 Conclusion:

The tradition of *Rasleela* in Manipur thus showed that it is strongly related to the religious life of the people. Their faith on religion is the main point that the *Rasleela* is still there with the high vibes as a most important cultural aspect. The *Rasleela* has its own features with high values and are worth mentioning. Throughout the ages it had scored the patronages of the rulers of Manipur and now days there is an increasing trend of collective patronage of *Ras* performances. The friends and the relatives of the parents whose children play the leading roles come and offer their support to the tradition either in cash or in kind. These kinds of patronages and the monetary helps are also the factors that make the *Rasleela* so attractive for the Manipuri people. The culture of *Ras* thus marked Manipur as a rich cultural house and it connect them with the mainline of cultural heritage of Indian.

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